



**PAMELA HARRISON CHAMBER WORKS**  
**Robert Plane (clarinet), Gould Piano Trio,**  
**David Adams (violin), Gary Pomeroy (viola)**  
**Resonus**

While studying clarinet at the Guildhall around the turn of the millennium, I would often sit in the college library listening to Thea King's recordings of works by Howells, Cooke, Rawsthorne and other treasures of the 1950s and 60s. This pocket of English chamber music featuring the clarinet remains a favourite – a purple patch of urbane, reserved, emotive and gently modernist repertoire, somehow completely English in the best possible sense.

From its opening notes, this recital transported me straight back to those library listening sessions, though I regret now that the music of Pamela Harrison (1915-1990) was not a feature of these. All the works presented on this new release are world premiere recordings – better late than never, but it is sad indeed that they were not recorded sooner.

Clarinetist Robert Plane is a dedicated advocate of British clarinet music and made the premiere recording of Ruth Gipps' Clarinet Concerto in 2019. He offers a substantial essay on Harrison in this CD's sleeve notes, detailing her life, work and unjustified neglect by the musical establishment. Plane rails against the sexism she faced, which included needing support from her famous cellist husband to get her works performed. Even these opportunities dried up when the couple later separated. Examples of the prejudiced treatment she was forced to endure are many and varied, from criticism that she dared set 'masculine' poems to music, to being patronisingly described in *Grove* as 'a slow writer' who 'produced a small output characterised by femininity and clarity.'

Born in Orpington to a successful musical family, Harrison studied at the Royal College of Music as both a pianist and a composer. She frequently performed in her own concerts and was championed by her teacher Gordon Jacob, who thought her Viola Sonata was touched by genius. She worked fruitfully across many instrumental and vocal combinations, and in all likelihood would not have thought of herself as a clarinet specialist, despite writing a series of works for the instrument that were inspired by her friendship with Jack Brymer.

The earliest work presented on this recording is the Sonatina for Violin and Piano from 1949. Its first movement opens with a statuesque melody with contrasting skittish semiquaver passages, sombre in mood, with bursts of playfulness. The middle slow movement continues in a similar vein but with greater emotional depth and some interesting thematic development. The finale is lively but still close in feel to the other movements, giving a sense of unified musical architecture. Violinist Lucy Gould and pianist Benjamin Frith perform excellently.

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The 1953 Sonata for Clarinet and Piano features Plane and Frith. Like the previous work it has three movements and a soloistic piano part, making both works true duos as their titles suggest. There are shades of Arnold Bax and John Ireland here, but Harrison's music is more rhythmic and demonstrative. It offers little by way of simple consolation, but has remarkable emotional honesty.

The Sonata's first movement runs to an expansive six minutes, building to a crazed climactic section with some darkly comic dissonances in the piano – audacious stuff. The four-minute second movement offers gentle repose and sensitive melodic exchanges between the two players, before the third spins us into a frenzy of excitement, culminating in an elegiac coda. Plane gives an inspiring performance with a wide dynamic range and superb intonation. He is a formidable player, combining the best of the 'English' mellifluous tone with modern levels of technical assurance.

The 1956 Quintet for Clarinet and Strings opens the record (but as in the sleeve notes, I have chosen to discuss the works chronologically here). It showcases some swoon-worthy string textures dovetailing immaculately with the clarinet – testament to Harrison's abilities as an orchestrator.

The Quintet's compact first movement could be compared with Howells' *Rhapsodic Quintet* in the breadth of its scope and ambition, but Harrison loses no ground to Howells in terms of artistic vision. The second movement is

a spacious meditation featuring a floating clarinet melody that opens out majestically, while the third is another thrillingly full-blooded Harrison finale. Plane and Gould are joined by David Adams (violin), Gary Pomeroy (viola) and Richard Lester (cello), and everyone does a tremendous job, their respect for this rediscovered repertoire clearly shining through.

The first movement of Harrison's 1966 Piano Trio curiously reuses the opening theme of the Clarinet Quintet but with a more baroque contrapuntal treatment. The second movement runs to eight minutes and is characterised by open, spread chords in the piano, over which the violin and cello are given languid, yearning solos. A bright *Animato* closes the work.

Four single-movement items intersperse the larger works – charming lollipops with piano accompaniment for cello (*Sonnet, Idle Dan*), bassoon (*Faggot Dance*, performed by Florence Plane) and clarinet (*Drifting Away*). Each one is decidedly sophisticated, belying surface appearances of simplicity. *Drifting Away* is a particularly touching piece that was performed by Brymer at the composer's funeral. In the wake of this fine recording, let us hope that the music of Pamela Harrison soon drifts back into focus.

Chris Walters